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DE RUEHLB #0984/01 2451349
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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5649
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 3580
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 4114
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000984

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR IO A/S EBRIMMER
ALSO P FOR AWELLS/RWALLER
DRL/NESA FOR JBARGHOUT
PARIS FOR DNOBLES
USUN FOR AWOLFF/EGERMAIN/ASCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR DSHAPIRO/MMCDERMOTT
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/01/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: HARIRI AND AOUN: WHO WILL BLINK FIRST?

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) All signs indicate that Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri is planning to break the deadlock over cabinet formation by proposing a cabinet list to the President without further consultation with the opposition. Advisor Nader Hariri described Saad's August 31 meeting with opponent Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) head Michel Aoun as "talking to a wall," and although Saad would meet with Aoun's son-in-law Gebran Bassil on September 2 to restart negotiations, Nader was pessimistic about success. Aoun is a "facade" for "more profound" forces, Nader Hariri insinuated, as he called for USG pressure on Syria to break the deadlock. Opposition to Saad Hariri's plan is evident even within the majority bloc, however, as some consider it risky. Meanwhile, President Michel Sleiman stressed the need to form a government before the convocation of the United Nations General Assembly and called for dialogue. The FPM, which criticized Hariri for not respecting it or engaging with it seriously, is looking for a concrete response from Hariri but feels that he is "not in a hurry" to resolve the crisis. A strategy of unilateral cabinet proposal seems likely to provoke a deadlock that Hariri is not guaranteed to exit victorious. End summary.

NEW MOVEMENT ON HARIRI'S
NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE FPM?

2. (C) All signs coming from HarixQQa for cabinet position distribution (15 for the majority, five for President Sleiman's bloc, and ten for the opposition) and quickly achieved an understanding on ministries with the opposition Shia Hizballah and Amal parties, he has foundered on the shores of the Christian opposition FPM and its ornery head, General Aoun. The exchange of insults in the press between Hariri's camp and the FPM decreased in the days leading up to the August 31 meeting between Hariri and Aoun at the presidential palace, but the assembly of 67 MPs from the majority on the same day reiterated Hariri's theme that Aoun and his excessive demands -- perhaps encouraged by outside forces -- are the blockage preventing cabinet formation.

HARIRI THREATENS

13. (C) Hariri's cousin and advisor Nader Hariri explained the strategy going forward to polchief on September 1 in Qoreitem. The previous day's meeting with Aoun was like "talking to a wall," Hariri complained, and although Saad would meet with Bassil on September 2 to restart negotiations, Nader was pessimistic about success. According to Nader, the FPM's demands for four of the six Maronite-controlled ministries as well as the ministry of interior and the ministry of telecommunications were untenable. In Nader's view, the FPM cannot take two-thirds of the Maronite positions in the cabinet. In addition, the interior ministry must stay in the president's bloc, he said, and the telecoms ministry must stay with the majority because caretaker Minister of Telecoms Bassil has not responded to requests from the Internal Security Forces and the Lebanese Armed Forces for telephone records. Although the PM-designate is willing to deal portfolios like labor and education to Aoun, he can't give him five portfolios and keep all of the ministers without portfolio in the majority's quota, Hariri explained.

14. (C) Aoun is a "facade" for "more profound" forces, Hariri insinuated. Hizballah is not pressuring Aoun to compromise, so "its intentions are clear," and "it's like deja vu all

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over again with Sleiman's nomination" as international interlocutors plead with roadblock Aoun to permit political progress. Hariri accused the opposition of attempting a "de facto" modification of the Ta'if Accords by forcing the PM-designate to negotiate with them, a condition of cabinet formation not laid out in the constitution. "For us it is not an indefinite process," asserted Hariri, saying that the next step is to present a cabinet unilaterally to President Sleiman. When questioned about the cautious president's expected reaction, Nader Hariri exclaimed, "He cannot be idle! He will sign or not!" If the president refuses to sign, Saad Hariri will seek re-appointment as PM-designate a second time and "all previous agreements are off the table, including a visit by Saad to Syria." If Sleiman signs, the opposition will likely boycott, he predicted, but they will be under pressure to explain "on what basis the rejected a fair agreement." In the meantime, Nader Hariri pressed the USG to lean on Syria -- which he alleged is trying to link the Special Tribunal for Lebanon to cabinet formation -- to ease the deadlock.

15. (C) Independent MP Michel al-Murr sketched out the specifics of Hariri's brinkmanship for the Ambassador on September 1. According to Murr, two decrees would be issued in succession. First, the PM-designate would sign, with the president, the decree forming the Council of Ministers, then a second decree would specify "interim" ministers to take on duties if any/all of the ten opposition nominees declined to participate. Murr calculated that this effort would succeed because even if the opposition declined to participate, there would be still be a cabinet of 20, two-thirds of the original 30, and Hizballah would not see it as productive to use violence to get its way since, "Hizballah will not go to the street over Gebran Bassil." Although Murr claimed that Sad Hariri asked him to convince the president of the merits of this plan, it is not clear to us if that is the case or whether Murr and his son Elias are trying to broker a breakthrough to prove their value in spite of the poor electoral results in their powerbase Metn region.

ALLIES COUNSEL AGAINST
PROVOKING CRISIS

16. (C) Opposition to the plan is evident even within Hariri's own bloc, however. Future MP Mohammad Hajjar told polchief on September 2 that he had strongly advised Hariri against a

unilateral cabinet proposal, although he assessed that only a "crisis" could lead to a resolution. For his part, independent Sunni MP and former prime minister Najib Mikati assessed on September 1 that Hariri had back himself into a corner while negotiating with Aoun, and he advised that Hariri should not push the process to a crisis by declaring the collapse of his first effort at government formation. In fact, Mikati said that he had advised President Sleiman that same day not to accept any such declaration from Hariri. Such a development, he reasoned, would be to the detriment of Sunnis by leading to a new round of Doha-like negotiations. (Note: Mikati is seen by many as the most prominent Sunni waiting in the wings as an alternative to Saad for the premiership should Saad throw in the towel. End note.)

PRESIDENT CALLS FOR
GOVERNMENT BEFORE UNGA

17. (C) Sleiman's willingness to play along with Hariri's brinkmanship is unclear, although he has begun re-engaging in the cabinet formation process after weeks of relative passivity. Despite Aoun's declining an invitation to his September 1 iftar, the president hosted the Hariri-Aoun meeting the day before. More importantly, in his speech at the iftar, Sleiman stressed the need to form a government before the convocation of the United Nations General Assembly in the middle of September since Lebanon's capability as an incoming member of the UN Security Council will be questioned if the country cannot even form a government. He urged "constructive initiatives" to solve the cabinet crisis,

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decried media slur campaigns, and called for mutual sacrifice in the interests of the nation.

FPM: HARIRI REFUSES
TO ENGAGE US SERIOUSLY

18. (C) Meanwhile, the FPM remains suspicious of Hariri, whom FPM MP Ibrahim Kanaan accused of going about cabinet formation the wrong way. Hariri is horse-trading portfolios instead of trying to build a strategic vision with all participants in the government, complained Kanaan to poloffs on August 31. "Talk to us about your vision!" he exclaimed to the absent Hariri, pointing out that for the last several weeks Hariri talked to Hizballah about Aoun (and not to Aoun directly), instead of talking to the Shia party about the fundamental disagreements he had with Hizballah before the elections, mainly its weapons. Instead, said Kanaan, Hariri had essentially blessed Hizballah's continued armament and was picking fights with Aoun not about substance, but about personalities. For his part, the Syrian ambassador last night said, "Syria is keen on seeing internal dialogue in Lebanon reach solutions."

19. (C) In a meeting just before his reunion with Hariri, a relaxed Bassil told polchief on September 2 that the FPM is willing to negotiate but that Hariri has failed to present a formal reply to its proposal submitted on August 28. Bassil, who was not present at the meeting between Aoun and Hariri the previous day, described the encounter's atmosphere as "normal" but without any positive signs or comprehensive proposals from Hariri, who allegedly floated several partial options. He said he was "hoping" for a concrete reply today but was "not in good spirits" since he feels Hariri is "not in a hurry" to resolve the crisis. The blockage is not foreign pressure, he asserted, but a result of Hariri's lack of respect for the FPM and the Christians in general. Bassil alleged that he was targeted in particular because as minister he has cut off corrupt deals previously set up by Hariri allies. The FPM never presented his name to Hariri as a condition, Bassil asserted, but Hariri made his re-appointment a problem in the media despite compliments on his performance behind closed doors. Hariri, by refusing to

engage on the FPM's claims on behalf of the 50% of Christians who voted for it, is "treating us like second class citizens." While Hariri quickly offered Hizballah and Amal the same ministries they held in the last government, he is trying to strip the FPM of ministries that it held and succeeded in, he claimed. While he hinted that the FPM would accept a return to the same ministries, it cannot allow itself to be discriminated against, he asserted. Even so, "Hariri could reach an agreement with us if he were serious," he claimed.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Saad Hariri's proposed strategy of putting forward a cabinet lineup without further consultation may provoke a standoff whatever the president's response, and there is no guarantee that Hariri will exit victorious. In addition the president, who values consensus above all else, is clearly positioning himself as the voice of reason and national interest, not confrontation. Ambassador will meet with Saad Hariri tomorrow to offer support to his efforts and to underscore the U.S. desire that cabinet formation take place in a way that enhances Saad's future ability to govern and meet the many challenges facing Lebanon.

SISON